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Sing-along software improves reading

One man's desire to be in tune leads to interactive program

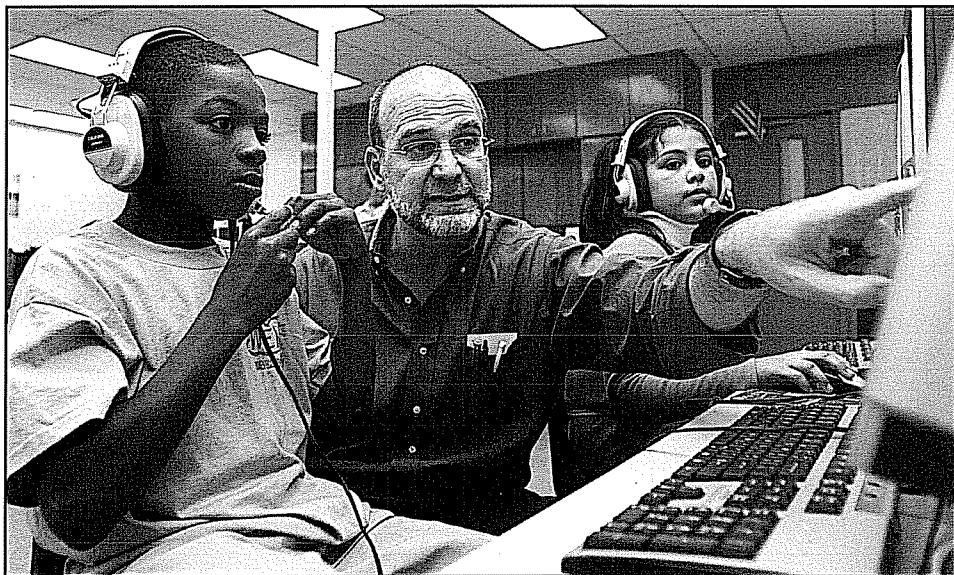
BY MARGIE MANNING
SENIOR STAFF WRITER

TAMPA — Carlo Franzblau was simply trying to teach himself to sing better when he developed technology that has made a dramatic difference in the reading abilities of hundreds of Florida students.

"Tune In to Reading," a software product from Franzblau's Electronic Learning Products Inc. that lets users sing along to popular music, has been shown to improve students' reading abilities by more than one full grade level in nine weeks in studies overseen by researchers at the University of South Florida.

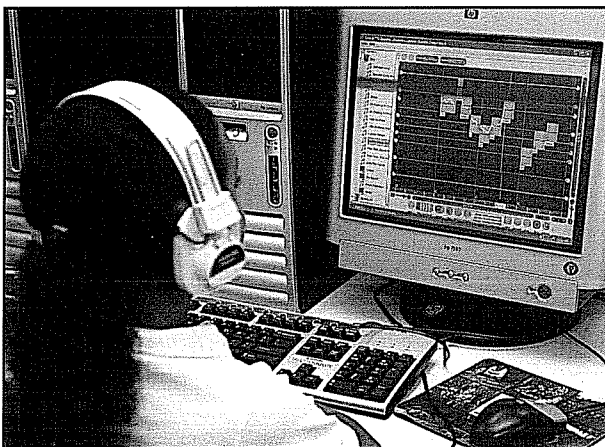
Although Franzblau and ELP have been quietly humming along in the development of Tune In to Reading for the past two years, the volume is about to get a lot louder.

The USF researchers will present their findings at an international conference in May in Toronto. A researcher at Massachusetts Institute of Technology plans to launch a study later this year examining the impact of the technology on dyslexics. ELP

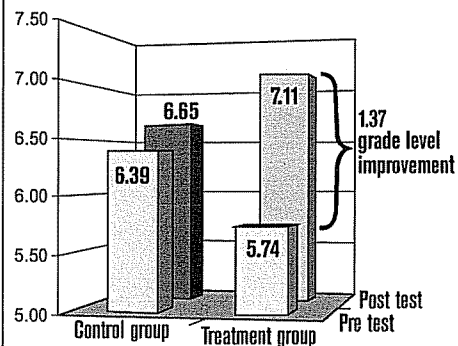


KATHLEEN CABLE

Above, Carlo Franzblau, president and CEO of Electronic Learning Products Inc., helps Palm River Elementary students James House, and Patricia Bezanilla, during the fifth graders' reading class where Franzblau's Tune In to Reading software is used.



Reading improvement in high school students who used the Tune In to Reading technology



Source: Electronic Learning Products Inc.

ABDIEL RIOS

will test a Mandarin Chinese language version of the program in four Hillsborough County schools this fall.

The Tune In to Reading program was in use in 55 Florida schools in the fall of 2006, and this summer Franzblau expects ELP will make its first sale to an entire school district. That sale could bring in between \$500,000 to \$1 million in revenue, Franzblau said Feb. 2 during a presentation at the USF College of Business Administration's

Executive MBA program.

The market potential is much higher, he said, with \$58 billion spent each year in the United States on literacy and 40 percent of U.S. students in kindergarten through 12th grade reading below their grade level.

MARCHING TO HIS OWN DRUMBEAT

Tune In to Reading's software is an outgrowth of "Singing Coach," a commercial product Franzblau began working on in

2000, more than a quarter century after what he half-jokingly calls a “traumatic childhood incident.” He was offered the starring role of Conrad Birdie in a summer camp production of the musical “Bye-Bye Birdie” but was forbidden to sing.

Luckily, he didn’t have to turn to musical theater for a career. After getting both his bachelor’s and his MBA from Harvard, he entered the family business, Thompson Group, a catalog publisher and marketing company in Tampa. But still wanting to learn to sing, he began incubating the concept for karaoke-like computer software that uses pitch tracking technology and animated on-screen vocal coaching, and scores users according to their ability to sing in tune and on tempo.

Singing Coach, which began commercial sales in 2004 at retail outlets and through direct marketing, had \$1.5 million in sales in 2006. But early on, the mother of a teenager who was using the product convinced Franzblau there was more than just commercial potential. That mom told Franzblau that her daughter’s reading was getting better.

“I didn’t start out thinking I wanted to solve reading problems. I started out to solve my own problem. The product does that, but it also solves the reading problem,” he said.

BLOWING HIS HORN

Franzblau met with Susan Homan, a USF literacy professor who has overseen three separate research studies using Tune In to Reading. Homan measured the effects on word recognition, comprehension and reading fluency.

The initial study in 2004-2005 found that 24 struggling Hillsborough County middle-school readers improved their read-

ing level by more than one grade level in nine weeks. Two follow-up studies, involving larger numbers of students, found even more dramatic gains in the reading abilities of elementary and high school students.

Homan will present the results of her research in May in Toronto at the annual convention of the International Reading Association.

Later in the summer or early fall, John Gabrieli, the Grover Herman Professor of Health Sciences and Technology at MIT, will launch his own study on dyslexic children. He’s interested in finding difference in the brains of children who read normally and those who struggle to read, and he will use magnetic resonance imaging to look at children’s brains both before and after they use the singing software.

“I was impressed that they had found these positive results (from Homan’s research) and that they had been willing to undergo an independent evaluation, which many reading programs don’t bother to do,” Gabrieli said. “I’m sure the people who have reading programs are well intentioned, but they seldom are willing to put the programs to an independent evaluation.”

ECONOMIC IMPACT

ELP is funded by Franzblau, his sister Alix Franzblau and their parents, Robert and Jo Franzblau. Carlo Franzblau presented at the Florida Venture Forum and a number of companies expressed interest in the product, but ultimately he decided he couldn’t get a favorable valuation for the firm at such an early stage.

There is some deep-pocket competition. Scholastic Corp. (Nasdaq: SCHL), a publishing, education and media company based in New York, has Read 180, a technology-based reading intervention

program, while Passport is a reading intervention program from Voyager Expanded Learning.

But local educators and technology experts seem to see advantages to ELP’s product. The company was selected as the recipient of the 2006 innovation of the year award from the Tampa Bay Technology Forum.

“In addition to the innovation they showed in developing their product, they have also shown that this product has great commercial promise with a high potential for strong economic impact on the Tampa Bay region,” said Laura Kolkman, president of Mosaica Partners LLC and chair of the Technology Forum’s awards gala.

The biggest business challenge facing ELP is that some educators think Tune In to Reading is too good to be true, Franzblau said.

“There’s a lot of resistance. We are trading in a currency our competition and clients don’t trade in, which is real reading level improvements,” said Ken Spiegel, COO of ELP.

To celebrate its accomplishments, ELP will host a Reading Idols event March 10 at Busch Gardens. Nine students from nine Hillsborough County schools who have shown the most improvement using Tune In to Reading will be given the star treatment for the night, riding with their families in chauffeured cars to and from the event, walking a red carpet and singing, all for a chance to win one of three college scholarships worth a combined total of more than \$10,000. The program is jointly funded by ELP and the Hillsborough Education Foundation.

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